DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 365 402 JC 940 163

AUTHOR Ruth, Richard
TITLE Teaching Introductory Industrial/Organizational Psychology as a Liberal Arts Subject.
PUB DATE Mar 93
NOTE 13p.; In: Teaching of Psychology: Ideas and Innovations. Proceedings of the Annual Conference on Undergraduate Teaching of Psychology (7th, Ellenville, New York, March 24-26, 1993); see JC 940 163.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Case Studies; *Course Content; Course Descriptions; Course Objectives; Critical Thinking; Higher Education; *Industrial Psychology; *Interdisciplinary Approach; *Liberal Arts; Observation; Psychological Studies; Role of Education; *Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS University of Virginia

ABSTRACT

Industrial/Organizational (I/O) psychology emphasizes the ways in which basic psychological science plays out in work and organizational life and is closely related to other disciplines. As such, it has a unique potential to help undergraduates think integratively. I/O psychologists deal with such topics as the role of tests in a diverse society, methods of making work groups functional, and the influence of computerization in society. While these topics can be taught in narrow, highly technical ways, they may also be taught in a way that helps students think broadly and deal with large social questions. At the University of Virginia's Northern Virginia Center, for example, an I/O psychology course is taught using the following strategies: (1) students are asked to write a one-page paper each week, discussing their critical reactions to the readings and class discussions of the previous week's class; (2) case studies are used to help students through the difficulties of digesting technically sophisticated pieces from the practitioner literature; (3) during field trips to work sites, students conduct psychological observations, and also observe observations; (4) a series of extended role-playing exercises are used mid-semester to address such topics as employer-employee relations and the class process itself; and (5) consultation skills and issues are taught through group activities to address such topics as diversity. I/O psychology can be relevant to cross-disciplinary themes such as diversity and rapid sociocultural change and can serve as a pathway to developing generic intellectual skills and an integrated understanding of psychology. (AC)

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ED 365 402

Teaching Introductory Industrial/Organizational Psychology As a Liberal Arts Subject

by Richard Ruth, PhD

University of Virginia

March 24-26, 1993

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TEACHING INTRODUCTORY INDUSTRIAL/ORGANIZATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY AS A LIBERAL ARTS SUBJECT*

Richard Ruth, PhD

University of Virginia

Many discussions about how to teach undergraduate psychology mention common parameters. How do we give students a feel for how scientific psychologists uniquely think without burdening them with details and nuances of scientific method that easily overwhelm, and detract from our main objectives? How do we convey our passion that psychology has a lot to say about the long debates and ultimate questions of the liberal arts tradition when the rapidly increasing sophistication of our science often makes our most interesting contemporary contributions come across as too abstract, atomized and experience-distant? How do we find the right balance between method and findings, classic and contemporary discoveries, the value of appreciating complexity and skepticism and the need for integrative theoretical perspectives? How do we both foster intellectual discipline in our students and foster their creative thinking? Further, we face the challenge of making our concepts and perspectives come alive for students in a classroom intellectual atmosphere that

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* Paper presented at the 7th Annual Conference on Undergraduate Teaching of Psychology, Ellenville, NY, March 24-26, 1993.

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affirms our discipline's respect for human diversity, as regards ethnicity, sex, and perhaps also the diversity of views within psychology itself.

This paper will attempt to describe some ways I have tried to think through these questions as they apply to the teaching of an introductory industrial/organizational (I/O) psychology class; some didactic methods and activities derived from this thinking; and some experiences in applying these methods.

Context of the Class

The University of Virginia runs a series of continuing education centers throughout the state. These are guided by a vision (as our dean, Philip Newlin, has put it) that we are not the night school of the University of Virginia -- we are the University of Virginia. Thus, we attempt to bring to a diverse group of students (most, but not all, adult learners) a level of instruction that combines high-level professional preparation with a deep regard for the tradition of liberal-arts discourse. There is an explicitly articulated value that promotes the development in this group of students of an intellectual rigor and outlook that goes beyond the mastery of subject matter narrowly defined. Many of us are engaged in thinking about how to prepare students for a future that is rapidly changing and increasingly complex, where they will be judged on whether they can evaluate critically newly emerging methodologies and theories, and not just on how well they have mastered the already known.

Our Northern Virginia Center, where I teach, is located in the suburbs of Washington, DC. The area embraces extremes of affluence and poverty. Over the past three decades it has changed from a classic Southern white and Black demography (many of my African-American students attended segregated schools) to one with large and growing Hispanic and Asian populations.

The Center offers several certificate programs for educated professionals who have grown into career responsibilities at a distance from their original training, or interested in exploring or acquiring an added module of competence. My course in I/O psychology is often attended by students studying for Total Quality Management or human-resources certificates; undergraduates from local universities pursuing individualized majors; and educators seeking added social-science credits. The students tend to be more female than male, and are culturally quite diverse. There are typically large contingents of government workers and of people in active military service.

The Role of I/O Psychology in a Liberal Arts Curriculum

I/O psychology, not without historical and conceptual justification, tends to be viewed as toward the "hard" end of the spectrum of subdisciplines in psychology, and, if present at all in an undergraduate generic psychology major, marginal to its liberal-arts core and identity. Undergraduate students may have an I/O elective at a school large enough to have diverse offerings; or I/O courses may be included in a business school,

with resulting role and identity tensions for faculty whose primary reference group may be composed of non-psychologists.

Yet I/O psychology has the potential to serve as a uniquely integrative subject area in a liberal arts curriculum. Isaac Asimov, in his Foundation series, saw psychohistory as the core discipline of his dystopian society; its ability to blend the personal with the sociohistorical made the discipline a fulcrum point for thinking about the larger issues in the society and made its interventions uniquely potent. Perhaps analogously, I/O psychology -- with its thinking about how basic psychological science plays out in the worlds of work and organizational life, and its intrinsically close relationships with economics, business, sociology, engineering, politics and history -- has a unique potential to help undergraduates think integratively. I/O psychologists deal with topics such as the role tests play in a diverse society, how to make work groups functional, the impact of computerization on society, the workings of organizational culture, and how to manage the impacts on workers when organizations change. Of course, it is possible to teach these topics in narrow, highly technical ways. But it is also possible to use these topic areas, particularly in an upper-level undergraduate course, to help students to think broadly and engage with large questions -- the core of the classical liberal arts mission, and perhaps the part of that mission most relevant to the task of preparing students to play active, empowered roles in a rapidly transforming social order. As a side benefit, students can be helped to develop deep and sophisticated grasps

of basic psychological theories by seeing how their proponents apply them in real-world business and organizational settings -- how, for instance, a psychoanalyst, vs. a cognitivist, vs. a systems theorist would view a company with a "glass ceiling" and intervene.

Instructional Strategies

Reaction papers. Students in the class are asked to write a one-page reaction paper each week, discussing their critical reactions to the reading and class discussion of the previous week's class. Some students have an extremely difficult time with this, either because of deficient writing skills (when present, these trigger a referral to remedial resources) or because they are unused to being asked what they think, saying what they think, or even thinking about what they think. Particularly in a "hard" (as opposed to "soft") subject, many students tend to view the subject material as technical and objective; at the beginning of the semester, I often comment that the students are summarizing what they read and what was discussed, rather than saying what they themselves think of it.

However, the requirement to make a time for reflection each week and write out what students think of the material, in my experience, has led students to have a much deeper engagement with the course material than might otherwise be the case. To write this systematically, and at this level, requires students to internalize and metabolize the material, and find ways to make it their own. Often this happens when students link a concept to

an experience in the work lives, and think about whether the theoretical construct really makes sense of their lived experience or not, and why.

I have also observed some felicitous side effects of this strategy. Many students report they understand difficult concepts better when they have to explain them back in reaction papers; particularly in a group of adult learners, this double-learning strategy seems to have a positive effect. Regular writing about ideas also helps to develop some old-fashioned habits of mind that often turn out to be as gratifying to the students as they are to me. Perhaps most interestingly, many African-American and Asian students find the writing helpful in that they initially feel reluctant to speak out in a class environment where their communication styles (tending to be more formal and less self-disclosing) are in the minority; the papers, with their inherent opportunity for private and more considered reflection, both form an alternative to participation in discussion, and a preparation or practice experience that can be a bridge for students to participate.

Case studies. Students often are tremendously excited when given case studies from the I/O literature. The interest in the material typically carries them through the difficulties of digesting often technically sophisticated pieces from the practitioner literature -- indeed, case studies, often more than anything I can say directly, give students an invaluable appreciation of what psychological thinking and methods can uniquely contribute in social and industrial settings.

I have used case studies of how organizations have decided whether or not to use honesty and personality tests, and whether or not to use separate norms for different sociocultural groups; descriptive organizational behavior studies of firms ranging from a McDonald's with a mostly minority workforce, to the executive suite of a multinational, to a largely bureaucratic unit of one of the military services; and organizational development, diagnosis, and process consultation interventions. These case materials typically invite a kind of Socratic discussion, which can do much of the work of contextualizing new topics in the syllabus.

Observation. Psychological observation is perhaps one of our discipline's greatest contributions to the culture; it is a method that crosses subdisciplinary boundaries, and with deep philosophical moorings and ethical groundings. Developing an appreciation for the potential contributions, strengths and limitations of observational data is one of the most useful competencies undergraduate psychological study can give to students who do not go on to become psychologists.

Too often, however, undergraduates observe in settings too experience-distant or protected to give them a sense of the power of observation. I/O psychology, thus, can usefully invite students to observe work settings, in which virtually all undergraduate students will spend much of their post-college life; and even more, to observe observation in these settings. The class has thus made field trips to fast-food restaurants, a supermarket, and a government agency that "serves" the public (in

the latter, they developed a deep appreciation of the quotation marks); the trips have been organized around instructional topics including organizational behavior, needs assessment for organizational development, and even more "hard" topics such as ergonomics. It has been interesting to learn how infrequently students observe what goes on in these familiar settings, and thus how little they are used to thinking or reflecting about what goes on there. Once again, the development of generic capacities to observe, think and reflect bring I/O psychology back toward the central core of the liberal arts curriculum.

Role playing and enactments. Toward the middle of the semester, when students have acquired a sense of some of the basic parameters and methods of the field, and thus are more equipped to participate as actors in simulations of actual I/O psychological work, a series of extended role-playing exercises are used. One year, responding to a particular situation at one student's job, we used a scenario involving a group of Cambodian maintenance workers and their European-American supervisors in a county government agency to work on the topic of employee relations. Another time, again based on a student's work experience, we did an exercise where students "consulted" to a public relations unit of a naval command interested in revising its organizational chart. Other role plays have used the class process itself as organizing themes -- for instance, asking students to draw projective drawings of their actual and ideal class experiences and analyze these.

Role playing has made some contributions to the class process that I did not originally expect. It has often helped students reflect on the class process itself -- the roles that various actors play in it; what works and what does not; the tension between what people say they do and what actually happens -- and to appreciate the potential usefulness of such a process of organizational reflection. Many students -- those who choose actor-parts in role plays, and those who do not -- often come away from the exercises with a new appreciation of the value of active learning, and of the multiplicity of roles each of them can potentially assume; this, again, is a powerful learning of a core liberal arts value, but also an important way of teaching-by-example certain syllabus topics in training and organizational development. Not infrequently, students playfully make accusations that the role plays have "psychoanalyzed" them; this personal experience of psychological intervention at an organizational level can reinforce and transform students' understanding of I/O psychology topics.

Teaching Consultation Skills

An undergraduate I/O psychology course can be a particularly valuable experience for students in thinking about diversity issues. This takes on a particular coloration in my personal case, in that I am Latin American and most of my students are not. In a few groups, where it was my sense that students had the maturity and perspective for such an exercise, I have taught a lesson about consultation skills and issues by asking a group

of students to consult to me about the tensions I experience being a Latin American instructor in a majority-culture setting.

In one version of this exercise, five student "consultants" were chosen. Each was given a group of classmates to work with, to help them develop ideas and intervention strategies; and the group of consultants was offered the opportunity to meet, both apart from the class and in front of the class, to work on the issues involved in forging a consulting team. Then, in a class session, the consultants interviewed me about my experiences as a minority instructor, and after this had a discussion about interventions they might, in their consultant roles, suggest to me. After each of these discussions, the class as a whole discussed the process of the discussion, the content and technical issues raised, and the implications of these for their understanding of the process of consultation.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this exercise for me is that it can successfully model the psychologist's use of self as an assessment and intervention tool. Watching me in a consultee role, students gain a different perspective on self-disclosure, the relationship between inner experience and organizational life, role multiplicity, the particularities of culture as a psychological construct, and the relationship between culture and personal experience.

Conclusions

I have attempted to lay out here a vision of how introductory I/O psychology can develop an identity at the core

of a liberal arts curriculum; some ways that teaching in this area can be relevant to developing understanding of such cross-disciplinary themes as diversity and rapid sociopolitical change; and some strategies for using I/O psychology as a pathway facilitating the development of generic intellectual skills and an integrative understanding of psychology.

Part of my interest in describing this material has been to share an enjoyable teaching experience with colleagues, and to have an excuse for trying to reflect on and systematize my understanding of my own work. I would equally be interested in learning how this perspective agrees with or differs from other approaches being utilized, and hope we will have an opportunity to discuss these issues further in the course of this conference.

Address for correspondence:

Richard Ruth, PhD

11303 Amherst Avenue, Suite 1

Wheaton, MD 20902